



A Love of Today: An Interview with Michelangelo Antonioni

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A Love of Today

AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHELANGELO ANTONIONI

Unless you count *The Mystery of Oberwald*, a television experiment based on Cocteau's *The Eagle with Two Heads*, which Antonioni shot for Italian TV three years ago, more of a challenge than a success, it has been exactly 20 years since he has made a film in his native Italy. Now, with *Identification of a Woman*, he has not only returned home, but has also taken up again a subject that was at the center of his best Italian work in the past: the infinite pitfalls of man-woman relationships. Of course, he won't readily admit to this simplification: the film is the story of a man—a film director, in fact—who seeks a woman to play a character in a film, and in the process imposes his own fantasies upon the women he meets. Or does he? The dialectic of the film is precisely this: to what extent does his camera document and to what extent does it invent?

ANTONIONI: I do not believe in autobiography, but every feature film is also, more or less, a documentary. That is, when it's a film on a contemporary subject.

BACHMANN: *Is love the contemporary story documented in this one?*

Let's say that there is love in the film, but it is a contemporary love, a love of today. A love for which a man who has two disappointments in a row doesn't tear his hair out, doesn't despair like one used to. He has a mature capacity for suffering, but he controls and in the end dominates it. He has learned to control his feelings and sentiments, especially within the framework of his craft which has taught him to hold back narrative flights of fancy.

So you think making a fuss about love is old-fashioned?

Let's say it's historical. It's part of other times, of past literature and of past art, past cinema, past theatre. There is something, for example, in an Ibsen play seen today, which is untenable, there is a distance emanating from

Ghosts seen today. I am trying to stay away from making generalizations, and want to concentrate on characters I see; and it is in this sense that I am saying what I am saying, not in a sociological sense. The characters are autonomous; I am only the author, as Pirandello says. Despite what has been said about me, I never identify with my films. It is true that I am emotionally involved with them, but only to the extent that I observe them with the emotion derived of the distance which "narrating" implies. But since your question was addressed to me in a more general way, I admit to believing that nineteenth-century passion today arouses only smiles.

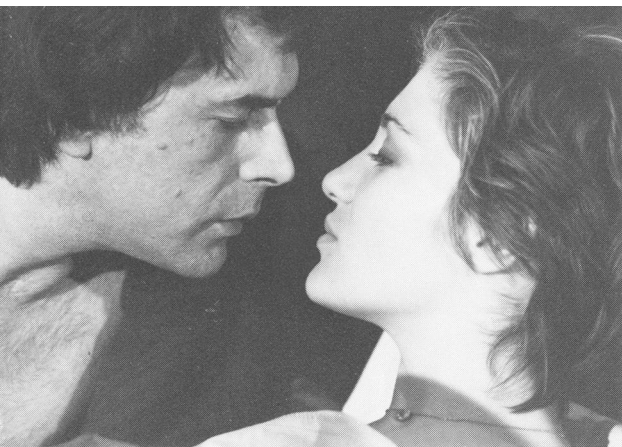
So when you say "control" and "domination" you feel that these are, in a man relating to a woman, achievements?

Certainly. And in a world where we are daily bombarded with catastrophic news and stimuli, the ability to restrain one's emotions becomes essential. In fact, we accept too much: especially in Italy—the Mafia, terrorists, disorder, anarchy—and in the end, without inner control, we might disintegrate. Control becomes a habit. A way of life, maybe the only one.

It could appear that in saying that you imply that your film-making has no participating function; that you only document the descent to restraint.

I don't like to talk in terms of "function." I have difficulty, anyway, to observe myself as a film-maker from the outside. As I am having difficulty, and you can see that, in talking intimately about myself. I actually hate doing it. An artist—in Proust's definition—may be a man ahead of his time, but the man behind the work may not be as far ahead.

Still you are indicating that restraint is being "ahead." While your film, in showing how couples are no longer able to properly relate, seems to say the opposite: that this modern restraint is rather an expression of poverty, a pity.



IDENTIFICATION OF A WOMAN

Of course, the passing of anything is always a pity. It's like pollution: if our organism won't adapt to the new, polluted environment, mortality will increase. And like our organism, so our psyche needs to adjust to new times in order to survive. And in fact, death is only a growing statistical hypothesis. But it is something that I, for one, refuse to accept, and thus life articulates itself in a long series of adjustments which we end up calling "modern."

Is Identification of a Woman, then, a film about the modern psyche? I noted, for example, that you devote extreme care to sound, something unusual in Italy, and something habitually considered a psychological medium rather than a rational one like the image.

I do not make this distinction. Hearing and seeing are both "direct" senses; I do not believe either needs mediation. Not like literature that requires a mind. In film, the sound has various dimensions: the effects and noise-recordings are direct, but human voices need interpretation. They are ambiguous and insecure, but voices are the only vehicle we have for comprehension. So they need mediation, orchestration. That's acting. It relates the characters to the world.

Do the two women in your film represent two different worlds?

I had not intended it this way. I know this is a possible interpretation: one from a more aristocratic stratum of society, contesting her origins, trying to make a new life for herself without knowing what this new life may be, and the other a woman who works, who has a sort of place in society and has achieved more of an identity. Thus their problems are not

equal. And their behavior, for example in sex, is different.

How is this expressed through the sexual scenes in the film?

It is here, in sex, that the first woman, instinctively, finds herself. That's why the sexual scenes with her are so *osé*, so daring, because they are the most salient parts of the narrative tissue within which this girl moves. They represent a logical development of her personality. Her sex activity is a liberating act. It is here she becomes herself.

You mean the other woman doesn't "need" it in the same way?

The other woman is already herself in her work. It is this second woman who is the saner, more human, even if simpler one. And she is simpler because she has a content in her life.

Are you indicating that the seeking of self-realization through sex is a neurotic approach, juxtaposed to the sane approach of doing it through work?

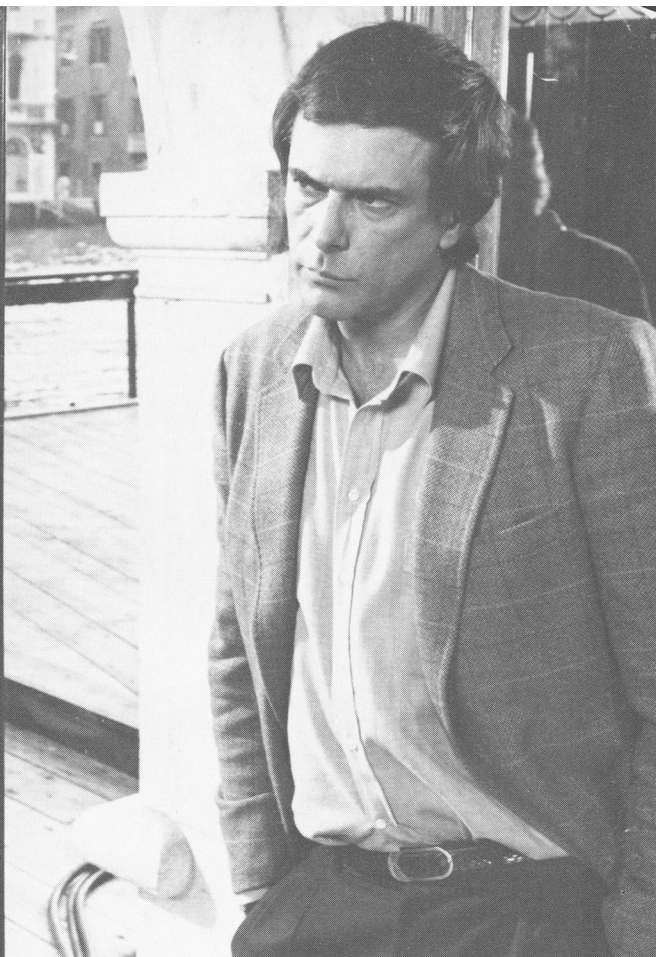
It is sure that the first is more neurotic. That is also a result of her social station and the environment within which she has lived. And thus of her nature. While trying to liberate herself of these ties she remains part of them. Ties which are expressed in gestures, words, acts, encounters. Take the party, where she moves like in a ballet within this world made up of counts, dukes, princes and the black aristocracy, where there isn't a single object that isn't authentic. She moves at ease within these walls made up of ancient leather wallpaper.

Is the self-liberation through sex within the range of habits of this crowd?

Even hiding it is part of their reality. But remember that I said it was only one way in which the two characters of the women could be interpreted. In creating characters I do not want to plan concepts.

What about the man, then? Does he typify anything?

Well, he typifies the men who exercise that profession and who are of that particular age, which I know, more or less, because while we are all different, we do share that common denominator of being always in search of characters, of themes, of ideas, of stories. It's a common concern. But this business of "typifying" is *a posteriori*: once the film is



IDENTIFICATION OF A WOMAN

made you can read those things into it, if you feel the need to do it. I don't. I am not that keen to give my characters a definite ideological position. Imagine all the brakes I would have to apply: instead of utilizing my visual stimuli I'd have to think in terms of translating concepts. I work through inventions and intuitions, which are not necessarily linked to a predetermined dialectic.

Does this put you in the camp of those who now, after so many years of the opposite, defend the view that engagement, in the existential sense, is something of the past?

You could put it like that, if you want. We live in a period of what in Italy is called "riflusso," a reaction against pure social engagement. But of course I didn't make the film just to express this.

Leaving it open like that, and having said what you've said about love, is it maybe you, the thing that is "typified" by the male protagonist?

I do not believe that biography manifests

itself through the telling of facts that have more or less occurred to one. In fact, to be more precise: the facts that occur in the life of this film director have not occurred in mine. A film is, or becomes, autobiographical in the degree that it is authentic. By that I mean that it is individually yours, tells a story in the way you want to tell it. It becomes part of you because of it being you who are doing it, your way. For example: in the morning, going to the set, I don't usually have clear ideas; I prefer getting there and finding that I have to resolve a certain situation and then doing it in the way it feels, starting from a virginal point. Everything that happens to me that morning—the things I see on the road, the light, the clouds, an item in the paper, a voice I overhear—all these condition me and transform me and eventually become part of that day's shooting, making it individual. What's important is who I am in the moment of shooting. That's where it becomes "autobiographical."

That would mean that your film turns out to be different from the script?

Very much so. If you compare the result with the intent you will find there is hardly a line that hasn't changed. But I do not notice this much during the shooting because I never read the script. I have the feeling of knowing it by heart but actually it is the film I know by heart and not that first version of it which was written down before the work starts.

Are you happy with the result, then?

I don't know yet, and may not know for years. When I think back to my other films, they keep changing. For example, my "favorite" isn't always the same one. It depends, again, on the experiences I have, the man I am at the moment. How I feel about the things that a film includes and how they concern me now.

You have always been concerned with the couple. In that sense, this film continues a prior engagement.

Probably. But in a developing way. Towards a view of today, a contemporary one.

Couldn't one say, in effect, that the red line of your film making has been the documenting of this development in an ever more contemporary fashion?

Actually I am quite tired of it. I don't want to be telling the same stories or dealing with the same theme. In fact, my next film will be

a very different venture. It will take place mostly at sea, it will be made in America again, and there will be sudden disappearances . . . but it will not deal with a man-woman relationship. There will be interactions between men, but not on a sexual level. It is about the possibility of living together, about possessiveness, about envy, the envy a man can feel for other ways of life.

Do you sometimes have such feelings?

Yes. Also because often, even without admitting it or doing it consciously, a man thinks back upon his own life and makes his reckoning. These are natural examinations that one undertakes, and inevitably certain things in your past don't exactly please you totally. It doesn't necessarily happen often—to me it occurs very infrequently—but when it does, one gets the feeling of there having been other possibilities. On the other hand, the past is a cadaver. Experience is a limited tool only. Also, it can make you sterile or distract you. I really believe that one must annihilate experience. Get free of it. Otherwise it lures you, ties your hands, makes you a victim of false promises. It robs you of that instinctiveness which to me is the most beautiful thing in human behavior.

Recorded in Rome on July 22nd, 1982. Copyright © 1982 by Gideon Bachmann.

BRIAN HENDERSON

Tense, Mood, and Voice in Film

(Notes after Genette)

*Narrative Discourse** is a translation of "Discours du récit," which is the major part of *Figure III* (1972) by Gerard Genette. Genette's topics are traditional ones of literary theory

and criticism: order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice in classical fiction and the subversion of these in modern texts. Genette offers no new method of literary analysis but a clarification, systematization, and extension of older ones, amounting to a transformation of them. The book is immensely stimulating and has already been quite influential.

Aside from a reference or two, Genette does not treat film, and his work cannot be directly applied to film. Each of his categories must be

**Narrative Discourse, An Essay in Method*, translated by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell, 1980). *Figures of Literary Discourse*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) comprises translations of Genette essays from *Figure I* (1966), *Figure II* (1969), and an additional essay from *Figure III*. See also Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1978), especially pp. 63–79.